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ABSTRACT

This study measures and evaluates the premarital sexual standards of a sample of adolescents residing in a small Mississippi community. On the basis of their response patterns to a set of Guttman scale items, the students were classified into three standards: abstinence, double standard, and the single standard of permissiveness. A racial comparison of the Mississippi sample with Reiss' Virginia student sample revealed striking similarities with one exception--a significantly higher proportion of Mississippi whites endorsed permissiveness without affection. The Mississippi data, however, failed to give strong support to the presumed prevalence of the double standard. Moreover, several social factors examined appeared to influence the standards of whites and females to a greater extent than those of Negroes and males. Accordingly, the results suggest that residence does not significantly differentiate standards of premarital permissiveness among adolescent youth. (Author/PC)

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PREMARITAL SEXUAL STANDARDS OF RURAL YOUTH: AN EXAMINATION OF THE REISS HYPOTHESIS

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Introduction

The study of sexual standard of behavior provides researchers with a number of challenges not readily discernable in other areas of societal values. Sexual standards are more sacred than other value patterns and tend to have "latent" bases (Udry, 1971:123-131). Many writers treat them as though they were contradictory and inconsistent with other societal values. In the American society these standards take on an added importance due to the fact that so many different ethnic, religious and regional groups make up the inhabitants of this country that a single value framework of behavior including that of sexual relationships becomes a remote possibility. One must also recognize the impact of the "sexual revolution" among younger population, with its symbolic connection of sex with love and its consideration of sex as a legitimate manifestation of love among unwed youngsters (Maranell, Dadder and Mitchell, 1970:85-88).

Since its inception as a subject of sociological investigation, studies of premarital sexual standards among American youth have been attitudinal in nature (Smigel and Seiden, 1968:11). To cite just a few such studies Bell and Blumberg in an earlier study dealt with attitudinal patterns of intimacy and courtship (1968: 61-63). Christensen and Carpenter, on the other hand, attempted

to compare bases of attitudes of sexual intimacy in a number of Western societies (1962:30-35). Finally, Reiss in a series of extensive studies carried the investigation to the area of premarital sexual standards, their attitudinal bases and their patterns of change (1967, 1968:26-32).

Reiss (1960:218-264) has demonstrated that although abstinence and the double standard retain a large number of adherents, there is evidence to indicate that youth are in a period of transition to a single standard of permissiveness which permits advanced sexual activity if an affectionate bond exists in a relationship. This transition is especially evident among youth in the more urban areas of the country (Reiss, 1967:74). Two major factors, the autonomous control by youth of the courtship system (Reiss, 1967:74) and the lessening of the female link to the conservative norms of the family group, appear to contribute to this transition (Reiss, 1967:104).

Reiss (1960:82-85) has logically inferred three broad types of sexual standards: abstinence, double standard, and the single standard which states that premarital sexual relations are equally acceptable for both the male and female. The traditional values of rural residents, in conjunction with prevailing mechanisms of social control, tend to support the double standard of male dominance (Reiss, 1967:75). Sociological research documents differential attitudes and behavior as one moves along the conceptual rural-urban continuum (Glenn and Alston, 1967:381-400). Limited research, however, in the area of sexual standards among rural youth along

with the notion of massification of urban norms preclude the widespread acceptance of the assumption postulating the prevalence of a double standard among one-third of our nation's youth.

Furthermore, a related assumption postulates that certain groups in our society who have a tradition of permissive attitudes will be less susceptible to social factors that tend to alter levels of permissiveness (Reiss, 1967:38-55). That is, groups such as blacks, males, low church attenders, etc., are more likely to be either double or single standard adherents. Moreover, the level of permissiveness of these groups is less likely to be influenced by such factors as age and dating behavior than is that of their counterparts--whites, females, and regular church participants. In a recent article by the authors of this study, this assumption was examined in a more general way than the analysis presented here. Students were classified into two permissive groups, conservative and liberal, and this classification scheme was then correlated with several socio-cultural factors (Harrison, Bennett and Globetti, 1969:783-787).

The assumptions stated above have been evaluated primarily on the basis of research conducted among urban youth. An often stated need concerns the paucity of data pertaining to the standards of rural youth. Therefore, this study measures and evaluates the premarital sexual standards of a sample of adolescents residing in a rural Mississippi community. Two lines of analysis are pursued. First, an attempt is made to delineate the existing standards of the sampled youth. Second, the study attempts to determine if

social factors tend to have a differential impact upon the sexual standards of adolescents who are members of either low or high permissive groups. In this respect, this study should contribute some factual information regarding the uncertainty surrounding the massification and diffusion of urban norms in our "more rural areas."

Research Procedures

The data for this paper were collected from a universe of senior high school students residing in a small Mississippi community. The study site is located on the fringe of the fertile Mississippi Delta, noted for its plantation-type economy. In terms of socio-economic status, the county ranks low in comparison to other counties within the state (Bryant, 1966)--the major occupations being of the unskilled and semi-skilled classifications.

A probability sampling procedure yielded a total of 132 students, 83 whites and 49 Negroes. The sampled students (10th and 12th grades) were interviewed in small groups by trained research assistants using a structured questionnaire. Anonymity was assured and the respondents were encouraged to ask questions for the purpose of clarification. They were, however, not permitted to collate responses.

The dependent variable--standards of premarital sexual permissiveness--refers operationally to two seven-item Guttman sub-scales introduced by Reiss (1964:188-198) to measure and evaluate male and female standards of permissiveness. The scale items in rank order of agreement include: (1) I believe that petting is

acceptable for the male before marriage when he is in love. (3) I believe that petting is acceptable for the male before marriage when he feels strong affection for his partner. (4) I believe that full sexual relations are acceptable for the male before marriage when he is in love. (5) I believe that full sexual relations are acceptable for the male before marriage when he feels strong affection for his partner. (6) I believe that petting is acceptable for the male before marriage even if he does not feel particularly affectionate toward his partner. (7) I believe that full sexual relations are acceptable for the male before marriage even if he does not feel particularly affectionate toward his partner. The students responded to a similar set of items on the female scale, the only difference being the reversal of the referent. An additional advantage of the sub-scales is that the equalitarian dimension of permissiveness can be measured by an examination of an individual's scale type on each of the two sub-scales. That is, by comparing the response patterns on each of the two sub-scales, the investigator is able to classify individuals into one of three standards--abstinence, double, or single standard. Thus, this categorization denotes not only an individual's level of permissiveness, but also his degree of equalitarianism in respect to permissible sexual behavior for the opposite sex. For example, a person assigned a scale type five on the male scale and scale type one on the female scale would be classified in the double standard category because his response pattern indicates that advanced sexual behavior is permissible for the male but not for the female. on the

other hand, a person who was assigned a scale type six on both scales is classed as a single standard adherent because of the expressed equalitarianism in his attitude toward acceptable behavior for both sexes. Finally, those accepting only petting for both sexes are classified in the abstinent category.

Those familiar with Reiss'work may note that our three-way classification is broader in that finer sub-types of the three standards could be delineated. For instance, it is feasible to examine the abstinence standard more closely if the sub-types, petting with affection and petting without affection, are used. The justification for the broader classification rests with two considerations. First, several of the sub-types were endorsed by a small number of respondents. Coupled with this, it is the relatively small sample size which makes a finer classification unfeasible for statistical purposes.

Findings and Discussion

Before proceeding with an analysis of the influence of social factors upon the students' acceptance of either the abstinent, double, or single standards, it is first worthwhile to make a racial comparison of the Mississippi sample and Reiss' secondary school sample. See Table 1. Utilizing a difference of proportions test (Blalock, 1972:228-230) to determine the significance of the difference between the two groups, the data indicate striking similarities.

(TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

Among whites, a significantly higher proportion of the Mississippi adolescents accept permissiveness without affection. In regard to the remaining standards, no significant differences exist. A majority of both groups favor abstinence. Moreover, the double standard received little support from either the Virginia or Mississippi students. An examination of the single standard reveals the essential difference between the two samples--the Mississippi students exhibit greater permissiveness.

Among blacks, however, no significant differences exist regardless of the standard considered. A majority of both groups endorse a single standard of permissiveness. Again, the double standard receives little support. Finally, only a slightly larger proportion of the Mississippi students endorses abstinence.

Another area of study involves an analysis of social factors in order to determine their influence on the level of permissiveness of groups. Socialization in our society, and especially among some sub-groups, supports differences among males and females in regard to values assigned to sexuality. In rural settings, both the formal and informal agencies of transmitting sexual values support a double standard of propriety by encouraging sexual conservatism for females and informally sanctioning more liberal attitudes and behavior of males.

In addition to the importance assigned to abstinence on the part of the females, the amount of affection present in a relationship is a contributing factor of their sexual expression (Ehrmann, 1959: 269).

Table 1. Racial Comparison of Mississippi Sample with Reiss' Sample by Standard Sub-Types (in percent)

	White				
	Reiss' Virginia High School Sample[a]	Mississippi Sample	Difference	Z Score	Significance Level[b]
1. Abstinence	65	58	.07	1.0510	.1469
2. Double Standard[c]					
Orthodox	10	5	.05	1.3026	.0968
Transitional	5	8	-.03	-.9021	.1841
3. Single Standard[d]					
Permissiveness With Affection	10	11	-.01	-.2353	.4052
Permissiveness Without Affection	2	18	-.16	-4.3299	.0001
Number of Respondents	147	79			

Table 1. Racial Comparison of Mississippi Sample with Reiss' Sample by Standard Sub-Types (in percent) CONT'D

	White				
	Reiss' Virginia High School Sample	Mississippi Sample	Difference	Z Score	Significance Level
1. Abstinence	20	28	.08	-.9184	.1788
2. Double Standard			.02	.5530	.2810
Orthodox	4	2			
Transitional	11	15	-.04	-.5834	.2912
3. Single Standard					
Permissiveness With Affection	37	28	.09	.9259	.1788
Permissiveness Without Affection	16	28	-.12	-1.4297	.0764
Number of Respondents	57	40			

[a]Eight percent of Reiss' white sample and 14 percent of his black sample were classified as reverse double standard acceptors. These proportions were not included in the table.

[b]The level of significance is computed on the basis of a one-tailed test.

[c]The orthodox adherents favor full sexual relations for males only; whereas, those who favor the transitional sub-type accept this behavior for females if engagement or love is present in a relationship.

[d]Permissiveness with affection infers the acceptance of full sexual relations for both males and females with love or strong affection. Permissiveness without affection means the acceptance of full sexual relations for both sexes regardless of the affection in a relationship.

This points to the hypothesis that females are more inclined to be abstinent and less inclined to accept either the double or single standard.

An inspection of the data in Table 2 supports this view for both whites and blacks. Males of both racial sub-groups tend to be more permissive than their female counter-parts. For instance, about 54 and 23 percent of the males favor the single and double standards, respectively. In contrast, only 9 and 5 percent of the white females endorse these standards. A similar trend, although apparently not as strong, is evident among black adolescents. A higher proportion of black males than females are classified as double standard adherents. Similar proportions, however, of males and females accept the single standard. This leads to the inference that differences between the racial sub-groups are based on the more conservative attitudes of white females as compared to black females. Conversely, the differences between males of both racial categories would apparently be slight.

The data recorded in Table 3 lend support to this assumption. That is, no significant differences emerge between the white and black males. On the other hand, over 5 in 10 of the black females accept the single standard as compared to approximately 1 in 10 of the white females. These findings only partially concur with those of Reiss' (1967:41-42). His studies indicate that a significantly higher proportion of blacks, both males and females, were hgihly permissive. Furthermore, even when his data are controlled for socioeconomic differences, race differences in sexual permissiveness

are not even reduced (Reiss, 1968:26-32). In other words differences between blacks and whites are manifested in the same socioeconomic setting.

(TABLES 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE)

Another area of investigation concerns the students' dating behavior and its influence upon premarital sexual standards. One assumes that more frequent heterosexual contacts, as evidenced in steady dating, would tend to foster permissive attitudes. The Mississippi data, as shown in Table 2, displays a relatively strong and significantly Gamma of .49 for the white sub-sample (Freeman, 1965). As expected, a positive relationship exists between steady dating and permissiveness among whites. As steady dating increases from zero to two or more times, the proportion endorsing the single standard increases from 18 to 44 percent, respectively. By the same token, the abstinent endorsees decrease from 73 to 33 percent. Furthermore, an increase in steady dating also results in a greater number of whites who accept the double standard, although the relationship is curvilinear.

Among blacks, however, the relationship between steady dating and sexual standards is weak and non-significant. In fact, the black youth who have never gone steady display a greater propensity for the single standard of permissiveness.

An examination of the data pertaining to steady dating and sexual standards with sex controlled reveals no significant associations for either sex, although the relationship is stronger among the females. See Table 3. Thus, the effect of steady dating upon

Table 2. Students' Premarital Sexual Standards and Social Factors by Race (in percent)

	White			Black		
	Abstinence	Double Standard	Single Standard	Abstinence	Double Standard	Single Standard
Sex						
Male	23	23	54	10	32	58
Female	86	05	09	43	05	52
	X^2 = 32.437	d.f. = 2	P < .05	X^2 = 7.958	d.f. = 2	P < .05
Number of Times Gone Steady						
None	73	09	18	31	06	63
One	73	00	27	40	20	40
Two or More	33	23	44	15	31	54
	G = .49	Z = 2.92339	P < .01	G = .00	Z = -.07006	P < .05
Religious Participation						
Low	40	29	31	15	23	62
High	73	00	27	50	07	43
	G = -.40	Z = 2.04044	P < .05	G = -.45	Z = 1.51423	P < .05
Father's Occupation						
Blue Collar	54	15	31	24	18	58
White Collar	69	09	22	50	00	50
	G = -.28	Z = 1.03174	P < .05	G = -.28	Z = .08984	P < .05

Table 3. Students' Premarital Sexual Standards and Social Factors by Sex (in percent)

	White			Black		
	Abstinence	Double Standard	Single Standard	Abstinence	Double Standard	Single Standard
Race						
Black	10	32	58	43	05	52
White	23	23	54	86	05	09
	X^2 = 1.401	d.f. = 2	P > .05	X^2 = 15.266	d.f. = 2	P < .05
Times Gone Steady						
None	30	15	55	80	03	17
One	33	22	45	75	00	25
Two or More	04	38	58	58	10	32
	G = .19	Z = .92239	P > .05	G = .33	Z = 1.45669	P > .05
Religious Participation						
Low	15	29	56	56	09	35
High	25	20	55	81	02	17
	G = -.09	Z = .22460	P > .05	G = -.49	Z = 1.87779	P < .05
Father's Occupation						
Blue Collar	15	28	57	67	05	28
White Collar	28	28	43	83	00	17
	G = -.27	Z = .60238	P > .05	G = -.40	Z = 1.07866	P > .05

sexual standards is differential and apparently conditions the attitudes of whites and females toward a more liberal standard. This trend is not apparent among blacks and males--the relationships of dating and permissiveness are weaker among these people.

In order to further examine this trend, the students' religious behavior was correlated with their preference of sexual standards. A review of the literature suggests that regular church attendance is associated with conservative sexual norms. The data presented in Table 2 show moderately strong associations between religious participation and sexual standards for both whites and blacks. The relationship, however, is significant only for whites. In both racial groups, the infrequent church attenders prefer abstinence. Although the data are non-significant among blacks, the relatively strong Gamma presumably indicates the social control function of black religion in the South. This would oppose the stereotype of black religion functioning primarily as a mechanism of emotional gratification.

Regarding male-female differences, Udry (1971:141) points out that for all three major religious groups, about twice as many religiously inactive females have engaged in premarital intercourse as have religiously devout women. Also nonreligious males have a greater incidence of premarital sexual experience than religiously devout males. Our data show that a significant and negative relationship appears among females when their standards are correlated with religious participation. For example, 35 and 17 percent of the low and high church participants, respectively,

accept a single standard of permissiveness. Fifty-six percent of the low attenders prefer abstinence, as compared to 81 percent of those who are regular in their church participation. On the other hand, a weak association was evident among the males. Regardless of their religious participation, similar proportions of males accept a single standard of permissiveness. Overall, the level of permissiveness of males is not significantly affected by their religious involvement.

A final factor is concerned with social class and sexual standards. Sociological literature suggests that persons of upper social strata favor conservative standards of permissiveness and conversely, those of lower strata are more liberal. Reiss (1965: 747-756) suggests, however, that it is a general conservative liberal life style of a group which factors in the group's level of permissiveness, and not social class per se. The Mississippi data do not have a strong measure of social class from which inferences may be drawn. If one accepts occupation as a more or less reliable indicator of class status in a rural community, then the data of this study would appear to support Reiss' finding of a non-significant relationship between social class and sexual permissiveness.

Among both racial sub-groups, a weak but negative association was found (Table 2). A similar trend is evident for males and females, as shown in Table 3. Apparently, therefore, the factors of sex, steady dating, and religious participation contribute a better understanding of a group's sexual standard than does social class.

In essence, therefore, it would appear that within each class grouping, there are forces of liberalism and conservatism which is more feasible as an explanation of a group's attitude toward premarital sex.

In conclusion, the foregoing analysis, representing, in part, a replication of Reiss' work in the area of premarital sexual permissiveness, attempted to partially bridge a gap created by the limited amount of empirical research in this area among our "more rural" youth. The primary objective was not to delve into the rural-urban issue regarding differential ethos, but instead, to examine the feasibility and fruitfulness of comparing youth on a national, regional and local basis.

If one assumes there is a trend in the larger society toward permissive standards, then on the basis of the data in this study, this assumption holds true for rural adolescents. Thus, the notion of the massification of sexual norms is applicable and the mechanisms of social control in rural areas, which traditionally support abstinence and the double standard, do not operate as effectively as one might expect.

Accordingly, the proposition may be drawn that residence does not significantly differentiate youth's standards of premarital permissiveness. Furthermore, factors which are operating in urban settings in altering the level of permissiveness of a group are found to operate in a similar manner among rural youth.

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